

Proper 7C 2016 Sermon

Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" -- for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Galatians 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

I was raised in a non-liturgical church, and therefore I had no real familiarity in my early years with the liturgical Seasons of the Church Year. My first year in an Episcopal seminary, I experienced Lent for the first time. I remember being told by many of my seminary classmates that they intended to fast for 24 hours on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Now, I had never fasted in my life, and to be honest, the thought of going for a whole day – 24 hours – without food was terrifying! But I did it, and it made me feel like I had accomplished something significant. I actually had control over this primal urge called hunger – and I liked that feeling!

Well, one thing led to another, and I began to restrict my eating on days **other** than Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In a few years, I was in a full-blown state of *anorexia nervosa*. At my lowest point, I weighed 93 pounds.

My family saw me wasting away and told me, “All you have to do is eat!” But I was possessed by this crazy but overpowering idea that I *must not* gain weight. At the same time, all I could think of, 24/7, was food.

If I had lived in Jesus’ day, without any knowledge of modern science, I would have been convinced I had a demon – for that’s *absolutely* what it felt like: I felt *possessed*. The worst part was that I had linked my **identity** with being super thin. I didn’t *have* anorexia; I WAS an anorexic. And I was afraid of not having **any** identity at all if I were to gain weight and no longer **be** an anorexic.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus asks a man possessed by demons, “What is your name?” And he replies, “Legion” – because he is possessed by so many demons. He can’t tell Jesus what name his parents had given him at birth, for he has lost his identity as a whole human being, and is now defined by what possesses him. David Lose writes, “He has been completely defined by what assails him, by what robs him of joy and health, by what hinders him and keeps him bound, by all those things that keep him from experiencing life in its abundance.

“And here’s the thing: I think that a lot of **us** aren’t all that different.”¹

I think that you and I can all too easily fall into the trap of defining *ourselves* in terms of those things which are *not* our **true** identity in God. Perhaps as a child we were told by our classmates that we were a loser, or ugly, or clumsy, or fat, or stupid, or whatever, and we came to identify with those labels. We came to define ourselves by our deficiencies and setbacks, our disappointments and failures. Now, if we think of ourself as a failure or as incapable of making it in the world, it can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I think a major reason that some physically able people apply for disability is not that they are lazy, but rather that they are possessed by a legion of demons telling them, “You’re no good. You’re not capable of making it in the world.” And when we “hardworking” folk look down our noses at them, we only strengthen their identity as “worthless” or “incapable.” As Christians, we should instead be strengthening their **true** identity in Christ, with all its beauty and potential. After all, we pledged in our baptismal vows to “seek and serve Christ in all persons...” (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305)

Now, perhaps you or I experienced a *different* scenario in our formative years. Rather than being labelled by our childhood peers as a loser, we were chronically sick in the early stages of our life, and we came to identify with that sickness. (It took me ‘til I was in college to get over seeing myself as a sickly asthmatic.) Or perhaps someone hurt us at some point in our life, and we have come to think of ourselves as “the mistreated one” or “the victim.” That is a powerful identity, for

it allows us to claim the “moral high ground” and to get sympathy from others, which only feeds all the more the feeling of having been wronged. We **can’t** let go of the wrong, can’t forgive, for we then would lose our identity as “victim” or “the person who was wronged.” This can also happen on a group level. How many candidates for political office tell groups of people, “You have been wronged, and I can make it right again!” The result is not healthier groups of people, but rather the encouragement of an “us vs. them” mindset – an unhealthy polarization, rather than encouraging a healthy coming together as a nation and as a world community, which is what we were created to be, and is clearly the unifying message of Jesus. (And it is the message of St. Paul in today’s Epistle.)

The Bible tells us that we are created in the image and likeness of God, and that unique image and likeness which each of us is – our **True** identity in God – does not include the words “loser,” “incapable,” or “victim.”

How *important* is it that we come to live out of our **true** identity in God rather than identifying with our inadequacies, sicknesses, or the hurts that have been inflicted on us? Consider this: today’s Gospel passage is the only time in Luke’s Gospel when Jesus purposefully travels to Gentile territory. He tells his disciples to get in the boat, and they cross the Sea of Galilee. Once there, Jesus heals this man who has lost his true identity, his humanity, restoring the man to “his right mind” and to his community; then Jesus gets back in the boat and returns across the sea to Jewish territory.

One is left with the understanding that Jesus made this long trip for one purpose: to restore a man who had lost his identity to his true self. *That* is how important it is that we allow the demons that have robbed us of our true identity in God to leave. Sometimes this may involve the intervention of some healer (medical, psychological, or spiritual); sometimes the demons are simply crowded out as we – through prayer and meditation – are filled with the Holy Spirit and our True identity in Christ. Episcopal author Agnes Sanford once said that there are two ways to get a cockroach out of an empty bottle: you can turn the bottle upside down and shake it until the cockroach comes out; or you can fill the bottle with water, and the cockroach will float out. Such is the “divine therapy” of Centering Prayer.

Now there is another detail in today’s Gospel that we should not overlook, and that is the townspeople’s *response* to the man’s healing. Luke writes: “when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. *And they were afraid...* Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were *seized with great fear.*” (Luke 8:35, 37) Why are the townsfolk not thrilled that the man was healed? Why are they “seized with great fear?” Because Jesus has upset the community dynamics, the community system. For in that community, this man fills a role: the role of scapegoat.

“The demonically possessed man represents the city,” writes John Shea. “He is the symptom-bearer of what the entire population is experiencing... He becomes the scapegoat, exhibiting in **his** tortured mind and body what lurks in all. When all the destructiveness is focused in one, the rest can go about leading as normal a life as possible... **One** man, naked and living among the dead, may be acting out the destructiveness, but the entire city is possessed.”² And Richard Rohr writes: “Hating, fearing or diminishing someone else holds us together, for some reason. The creating of necessary victims is in our hard wiring. Rene Girard calls ‘the scapegoat mechanism’ the central pattern for the creation and maintenance of cultures worldwide since the beginning. [It] is the best possible disguise for evil. We can concentrate on the evil ‘over there’ and avoid our own [demons]. Evil is never easily recognized **as** evil by those who do it; or as Paul so wisely says, ‘Satan disguises himself as an angel of light’ (2 Cor. 11:14).”³

So it is that the healing of this one man is like removing a large brick from the bottom of a chimney: the whole structure becomes unstable. The townsfolk see the source of this instability as Jesus, so they ask him to leave. No one likes change in a stable system, even if that system is unhealthy. We like things the way they are, even at the expense of creating scapegoats. We often prefer the devil we know to the freedom we do not know. Just as my anorexic self was afraid of what would heal me (food), so are these townspeople afraid that *their* demons have been cast out of this man, and he has been healed.

Jesus gets in the boat to leave, and the restored man begs to come with him. But Jesus sends him back. The man has been freed from the legion of demons, and Jesus sends him back to his own people – to restore **them** to *their* right minds, also.

And he sends us to do the same thing. For you and I are not the only ones who strongly identify with that which is **not** our true identity in God! So many people in our world do not know that they are beloved children of an infinitely loving God, so they seek their identities in other places. They wear a certain type of clothes, find a unique tattoo, find their identity in their nation, their ethnic group, their gang, their religion, their political party, the branch of the military in which they served, their candidate, their sports team, their car or motorcycle, this or that product which the advertisements tell us will make us cool or strong or look younger. They identify with their failures, their sickness, their disabilities, their hurts and grudges, their victimhood. Or perhaps even more common in our day and age, they find their identity by being **opposed** to some other person or group: the *other* political party or candidate, Muslims, immigrants, blacks, gays, lesbians and transgendered, the homeless, ex-cons – you can fill in the rest of the list easily enough. Finding our identity in being against these “others” keeps us from living into our **true** identity in God. And my friends, I have come to believe that identifying with the wrong thing – both on the individual and group level – may be the greatest problem we face in the world today.

Like the man in our Gospel, Jesus sends us out. He sends us out to ask people the question: “What is your name?” – and then to assure them that their true identity lies in the heart of an infinitely loving God. But first we must know it to be true for ourself.

AMEN

1 David Lose, “Legion,” Sunday, June 16, 2013

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=2609>

2 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 173

3 Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden*, Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008, pp. 134, 135